Theories of ethnic mobilization: overview and recent trends

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Abstract
This paper provides a non-exhaustive overview of recent thinking and research on ethnic mobilization in the social sciences. It does so in three sections. The first elucidates the term 'mobilization' and situates the literature on ethnic politics within a larger body of scholarly inquiry on political mobilization and social movements. The second part considers the main theoretical strands in the study of ethnic mobilization. It distinguishes between culturalist, reactive, competition and institutionalist perspectives. Finally, the third section explores the question of differentiated outcomes: what factors account for the radicalization of ethnic claims and the turn from ethnic mobilization to ethnic violence? The paper concludes that there are clearly various interacting factors responsible for creating violent ethnic conflict, but scholars have found no consensus yet on a definite list.

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Even though violent ethnic conflicts often look like highly unorganized and spontaneous outbursts of popular anger, in reality they always involve a certain degree of planning, organizational effort and strategic deliberation. An ethnic conflict only occurs when a critical number of people have made the calculated decision to pursue their goals with violent means (Wolff 2007: 6). Such a decision is part of a longer history of political organizing along ethnic lines. This longer process can be called ‘ethnic mobilization’; leaders decide to speak for ‘their’ ethnic group, thereby making the abstract idea of ethnic belonging a somewhat more tangible reality, and engage the members of this group into political action. This doesn’t mean that such mobilization inevitably leads to violence; as Rogers Brubaker and David Laitin (1998: 424) have argued, ‘measured against the universe of possible instances, actual instances of ethnic and nationalist violence remain rare’. In many cases ethnic mobilization firmly remains within the limits of peaceful democratic political competition (Habyarimana 2008). Neither does it mean that the grievances invoked by such political action are not deeply felt by the population prior to the process of mobilization, or that the population is not genuinely or spontaneously angered by ‘the ethnic other’. But the step from grievances to ethnic strife should never simply be regarded as an automatic linear chain from cause to consequence; ethnic mobilization is a complex, multidirectional and not necessarily convergent or coherent process. Therefore, it needs careful examination.

It is the purpose of this paper to present a brief and non-exhaustive overview of recent thinking and research on ethnic mobilization in the social sciences. I will do this in three sections. The first will define the term mobilization and situate the literature on ethnic mobilization within the larger body of scholarly inquiry on political mobilization and social movements. The second part will consider the main theoretical strands in the study of ethnic mobilization. Here I will distinguish between culturalist, reactive, competition and institutionalist perspectives. And finally, in the brief third section, which also functions as a conclusion to the paper, I will explore the question of differentiated outcomes: what factors account for the radicalization of ethnic claims and the turn from ethnic mobilization to ethnic violence?

1. What is ‘ethnic mobilization’?

Political mobilization can be defined as the process whereby political actors encourage people to participate in some form of political action. In its concrete manifestations this process can take on many different shapes. Political mobilizers typically persuade people to vote, petition, protest, rally, or join a political party, trade union or a politically active civic organization (for more on the definition of political mobilization see, Johnston 2007, Vermeersch 2010).

All political mobilization has in common that it is initiated by mobilizing agencies looking for adherents to a collective cause. These agencies try to persuade potential adherents to take part in public actions in order to defend that cause. Therefore, political
mobilization usually has a distinctly collective dimension to it. There is strength in numbers, mobilizers know, and so they seek to influence the behaviour of large groups of citizens in order to achieve well-defined political aims. These aims, however, may vary. There are myriad types of public action that are considered to best serve these causes, and there are many strategies used to persuade people to participate.

In order to situate the phenomenon of ethnic mobilization adequately in a wider sociopolitical context one needs a broad conceptualization of the term 'political mobilization', one that goes beyond merely the field of electoral politics. Traditionally, political mobilization is often understood as closely tied to elections (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993); studies of political mobilization for example focus on the effects of electoral campaigning (e.g. Shanto and Simon 2000) or seek to explain fluctuations in voter turnout (e.g. Franklin 2004). Mobilization in this sense is seen as consisting of those actions that elites undertake in order to garner a growing group of supporters and persuade them to express their affinity through the ballot box. Among the questions that researchers have traditionally asked are: What determines voters’ decisions? And to what extent is the success of electoral mobilization dependent on existing affiliations, organizational capacities, or persuasive ideas? More specifically, the study of ethnic electoral mobilization weighs the relative importance of different potential sources of ethnic voting: cultural affiliation, political manipulation by elites, and existing socio-economic divisions that coincide with ethnic boundaries (e.g. Leighley 2001).

Political scientists would, however, only have a narrow understanding of the process of ethnic mobilization if they were to exclude from their scope those forms of political action that take place outside the electoral process, ranging from peaceful protest to violent revolutions. So, there is a need to adopt a broader definition of political mobilization in order to study the complexity of ethnic mobilization. The notion has to be extended to include the field of unconventional political action, or as it is sometimes referred to, contentious politics. Many now view extra-electoral action as an inherent aspect of political mobilization. Such non-electoral initiatives – including protest marches and civil disobedience, but also lobbying, strategic litigation, and press conferences – may have profound consequences on policymaking, even though researchers still disagree on how effective their influence is (Amenta et al. 2010, Baumgartner and Mahoney 2005, Skocpol 2003). Despite that disagreement, political scientists generally agree on the idea that such unconventional expressions are ever more becoming a part of regular politics. It is a form of politics that does not diminish with the advent of modernization. In fact, especially in advanced democracies they are increasingly viewed as a ‘normal’ characteristic of politics. Political mobilization thus covers a broad spectrum of public action, from the covert to the disruptive, and from the institutionalized to the unconventional.

The study of political mobilization outside electoral politics has deep roots in political sociology and, in particular, in the study of mass protest and social movements (Amenta et al. 2010, della Porta and Diani 1999, Edelman 2001). This sociological view on political mobilization has allowed analysts to look for factors beyond electoral campaigns. These studies have examined the way in which protest waves and social movements have emerged, how they have developed, and what impact they have had on policy outcomes or social change. They have brought several new dimensions of mobilization to the attention of political scientists: the social grievances underlying collective action, the importance of resources, the role of meaning manipulation and ideas, and the political context (the opportunities and constraints) shaping such action. For example, contemporary researchers do not simply view the American black civil rights movement as a spontaneous mass response to social grievances (e.g. McAdam 1982). They have examined the political opportunity structures that have shaped this movement, the resources that have supported it, and the global spread of human rights
norms that has given the movement’s ideas, claims and demands a universal validity (Jackson 2006).

Social movement research has thus considerably altered political scientists’ understanding of what is ‘political’ in mobilization. Political scientists are now increasingly inclined to question the neat division social scientists once made between the political significance of political parties and interest representation in state institutions, on the one hand, and the social and cultural (but supposedly less political) weight of social movements, on the other. Of course, social movements have important cultural and social implications; but they are also inherently political, even when they, as they sometimes do, propagate methods that are disruptive to political and social stability and peace such as such as rioting or ethnic cleansing. Sometimes the mobilization of people into non-electoral and non-institutionalized types of public action may lead to new and stable political interest cleavages. These interest cleavages, in turn, may serve as a new basis of electoral mobilization.

Ethnic mobilization is thus far more than electoral campaigning on the basis of ethnicity. It occurs not only at the time of elections but also during other points in time, most likely at the time of particular events that can form a basis for mass action, be it in the form of collective street protests or less visible forms of petitioning.

2. Theories of Ethnic Mobilization

It is perhaps surprising that theorizing on ethnic mobilization in political science literature cannot look back upon a long history. Traditionallly, political scientists did not attach much importance to the ethnic aspects of political mobilization. Not that ethnic politics was entirely discounted; but scholars often assumed that the politics of ethnic solidarity would be disappear with the ongoing development of modernization and the spread of liberal-democratic values (Kymlicka 2000: 184). For others, mainly before the 1960s, ethnicity was a transitional phenomenon or a factor that did not, and would not, have any influence on the formal political system (Taylor 1996: 886). In some cases this argument was inspired by the Marxist reasoning that class identity would prevail over other types of identity through the struggle against capitalism. Still others, especially in the 1980s, dismissed the subject, and even predicted the decline of ethnic attachments because of the advancement of liberal democracy. Glazer and Moynihan dubbed this the ‘liberal expectancy’ (Glazer and Moynihan 1974: 33); ethnic identities were seen as merely transitory and were assumed to vanish into the inevitably growing cosmopolitan ethnic melting pot (Moynihan 1993: 27–28).

The resurgence of political mobilization of territorially based linguistic groups in Western Europe in the 1970s – think of the mobilizations of the Bretons and Corsicans in France, the Celtic-speaking populations in Great Britain, or the Flemish-Walloon cleavage in Belgium – clearly contradicted the expectations of classical social theory (Ragin 1987: 133). Ethnic differences within one country did not seem to erode over time, a phenomenon that made the need felt for additional theorizing. However, it was the surge in ethnic conflict in the last decade of the twentieth century that changed views on ethnic mobilization most profoundly. This historical development called for a refocusing of attention on the need to think about the relationship between ethnicity and politics. Since the 1990s political scientists have indeed written a considerable amount of literature on the phenomenon.

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2 This section of the paper draws on, and builds on, Vermeersch 2006: 28-44.
In this broad literature, which has its roots in the 1960s but grew considerably in the 1990s, one can now discern roughly four different theoretical perspectives on ethnic mobilization:

1. the ‘culturalist’ perspective, which emphasizes the significance of strong subjective bonding and values within ethnic groups for shaping the lines of ethnic mobilization.
2. the ‘reactive ethnicity’ perspective, which uses an economic perspective to argue that the primary cause of ethnic mobilization lies in the coincidence of ethnic bonding and relative deprivation;
3. the ‘competition’ perspective, which focuses on ethnic leaders making rational calculations about their identity and invoking ethnicity in their struggle for resources and power;
4. the ‘political process’ perspective, which emphasizes the role of the macropolitical context, consisting of (1) the institutional environment and (2) the dominant political discursive context.

Each perspective takes a different set of factors to be primarily responsible for causing and shaping ethnic mobilization. This four-pronged distinction is of course a rough analytical device but it offers an opportunity to structure the literature and gain insight into the pattern of explanatory variables that theorists have considered to be pivotal in driving ethnic mobilization. I will consider these perspectives in turn.

### 2.1 Culturalist approaches to ethnic mobilization

Culturalist perspectives distinguish themselves from other approaches by their view on the role of culture in the process of ethnic mobilization. Culturalists regard cultural socialization process as the most fundamental factor explaining ethnic mobilization. In other words, the fact that members of an ethnic group share a common culture is seen as determinant for the group’s pattern of mobilization. The view is close to that of primordialism. According to Fearon, primordialists claim that ethnic groups ‘are naturally political, either because they have biological roots or because they are so deeply set in history and culture as to be unchangeable ‘givens’ of social and political life. In other words, primordialists assume that certain ethnic categories are always socially relevant, and that political relevance follows automatically from social relevance’ (Fearon 2004: 6).

Most authors denounce the idea that there is a biological basis to ethnic solidarity, but the view that ethnic identities are based on cultural affinities that have an overpowering emotional and non-rational quality is more widely accepted (Allahar 1996; Oberschall 2000: 982). One school of thought in international relations literature, for example, argues that culture should be seen as the crucial independent variable explaining economic and political developments (Harrison and Huntington 2000). Throughout long periods of history, it is argued, cultural attributes such as religion or community traditions have influenced population groups so profoundly that it becomes relatively easy to engage them in a process of collective action or even conflict on the basis of these attributes.

The basic assumption that governs this literature is that ethnic mobilization is the natural reflection of cultural structure. The obvious conclusion, then, is that people from the same ethnic group will have some sort of a fundamental connection because of their shared culture and will therefore organize in similar ways. Their political or economic position may to a certain extent facilitate or suppress that mobilization, but it is ultimately the cultural content that forms the backbone of the mobilization process. On the basis of the assumption that action is expressive of culture, the argument is
made that each ethnic group should exhibit a unique mobilization pattern (Ireland 1994: 8). The same ethnic group in different societies is expected to adopt roughly similar forms of mobilization.

Several criticisms have been made against culturalist perspectives. The first criticism is that culturalists have too readily taken for granted that an ethnic group is characterized by a shared culture. Yet, so critics contend, it is difficult to define the cultural essence of an ethnic group, and therefore culture is too diffuse to be a useful explanatory variable. As Nathan Glazer has argued: ‘What does Italy in the large tell us about the typical Italian immigrant, poor, from the south, uneducated? Are we to take him as an example of the culture and civilization of Catholic Europe, of the Mediterranean, of peasant life, all of which and more may be considered to mark him?’ (Glazer 2000: 223).

Secondly, some authors contend that culturalist explanations of ethnic mobilization tend to be tautological. The culturalist perspective considers ethnic identity to be determined by culture, but suggests at the same time that the individuals of a group have a common culture because of their common ethnic identity. Obviously, such reasoning leads to circular explanations of ethnic mobilization.

Another criticism argues that culturalist descriptions fail to appreciate the role of agency. By excluding the role of agency, these theories manifestly fail to account for the fact that individuals and groups can change both their culture and their ethnic identity, consciously or unconsciously, or that their ethnic identity can assume a different meaning over time, dependent on the political circumstances. This criticism points for example to cases where there is empirical evidence that clearly shows that leadership and strategy have exerted a great deal of influence on ethnic bonding and ethnic movement patterns (e.g. Ireland 2000: 270).

\[ \text{2.2 Reactive Ethnicity} \]

The ‘reactive ethnicity’ approach considers the rise of ethnic mobilization as a process prompted by the unequal division of resources along ethnic lines. The term itself is strongly associated with the work of Michael Hechter on politics in the Celtic fringe of the British Isles in the early 1970s (Hechter 1975). In Hechter’s formulation reactive ethnicity means that ethnoregional loyalties and conflict within a state may be strengthened as a result of increasing levels of economic inequalities between the core and the ethnically distinct periphery. Although Hechter applied this approach specifically to offer an explanation for territorially based ethnic identities in a particular region, similar theoretical perspectives were applied to explain other instances of ethnic mobilization that have clearly less been connected to the core-periphery distinction. A prominent example of this line of reasoning was Bonacich’s ‘split labor market theory’ (Bonacich 1972), which holds that ethnic antagonism is generated by the competition arising from a differential price of labour for the same occupation. Ethnic mobilization in this version is dependent on the economic competition between ethnically differentiated segments of the working class. Theories that could be considered as similar to the ‘reactive ethnicity’ approach have also been applied to explain revolts in American ghettos (Blauner 1969) and more recently to explain ethnic mobilization patterns among immigrant minorities in Western Europe (Drury 1994: 16).

This theoretical approach, too, has met with a number of criticisms. First of all, economic disadvantage is clearly not a sufficient condition for the occurrence of ethnic mobilization. It is not that difficult to find examples of economically disadvantaged ethnic groups that do not engage in politics or protest. The level of mobilization does not seem to be dependent on the level of disadvantage. Conversely, if ethnic mobilization occurs, it is not necessarily accompanied by economic disadvantage.
Some scholars, for example, have pointed to the resurgence of ethnic solidarities in regions that are economically advantaged relative to other areas in the state (Coughlan and Samarasinghe 1991: 4). Furthermore, social movement scholars have argued that there is little or no relationship between variations of relative deprivation and the pace and timing of collective protest (Piven and Cloward 1995).

In response, a number of social movement scholars have instead focused on the resources that movement organizations and movement entrepreneurs need in order to be able to engage in political action, including ethnic action; their approach has become known as ‘resource mobilization theory.’ Resources such as money, expertise, access to networks and people permit social actors to take strategic decisions with the purpose of mobilizing for social and political change. Taking social movement actors as rational actors has provided an important inspiration for theorists on ethnic mobilization focusing on the role of leaders. This is what I call the ‘ethnic competition’ perspective.

2.3 Ethnic Competition

According to the competition model, society revolves around a struggle for scarce resources. It argues that it is not economic deprivation itself, or at least not alone, that gets people to mobilize. On the contrary, economic advancement of previously disadvantaged groups can result in an escalation of inter-group conflict. According to this view, the mere fact that groups can compete for the same resources as a result of their economic advancement may contribute to conflict. This competition will be greater when the inequalities increase both on the elite and the mass level (see, e.g., Langer 2005). In addition, some proponents of the competition perspective emphasize ‘the entrepreneurial role in ethnic politics: how the mobilization of ethnic groups in collective action is effected by leaders who pursue a political enterprise’ (Barth 1994: 12). Within this perspective emphasis is placed on the ability of elite political entrepreneurs to respond to economic and political circumstances. This perspective usually does not pay much attention to mass beliefs in common origin or mass culture, but instead it claims that the idea of an ethnic group refers sociologically to an overlap between patterns of (positive or negative) recognition of ethnicity and of resource allocation (in the broadest sense, of which economic resources are simply one important instance) along those officially recognized ethnic lines (Crowley 2001: 102).

In contrast to most culturalist and reactive ethnicity approaches, the competition perspective usually regards ethnic group identity not so much as a pre-existing fact as a phenomenon that arises, or at least gains new meaning, during the process of ethnic competition. In order to defend material interests, self-proclaimed group leaders invoke an ethnic group identity or apply new meaning and interest-based connotations to existing ethnic terms. In this way identity and interests are mutually reinforced.

In this perspective the existence of an ethnic group is thus not a given. It is the result of the act of making one label more prominent and more relevant as a frame for identification and affiliation. The making of an ethnic group is something that is actively pursued (through discrimination or through emancipation) not by the abstract collective of a pre-existing group itself, but by particular actors, including organizations and individual ethnopolitical activists. Somewhat more provocatively formulated, one could say that this perspective argues that ethnic activists or ethnopolitical entrepreneurs ‘produce’ ethnic groups, not the other way around.

According to Daniel Bell, ethnicity in the competition perspective ‘is best understood not as a primordial phenomenon in which deeply held identities have to re-emerge, but as a strategic choice by individuals who, in other circumstances, would choose other group memberships as a means of gaining some power and privilege’ (Bell 1975: 171). The assumption here is that politics is not an automatic reflection of ethnic divisions; on
the contrary, ethnic divisions are invoked through a political struggle against situations of marginalization and inequality. For example, certain leaders may find it useful to organize a group around a common ethnic identity when they sense that this group has been placed in a specific position in the workplace, experiences a common form of discrimination, or suffers from income inequality. Other authors approaching ethnicity from this perspective have emphasized that it is not only the economic position that contributes to the construction of certain patterns of ethnic minority mobilization, but also the differential distribution of political power (Oberschall 2000: 983).

The competition perspective has been inspired by what has been called an instrumentalist critique of primordialism. Instrumentalists disagree with the assumption held in primordialist (and culturalist) accounts that ethnicity is strongly determined by common ancestry and traditions. Instrumentalism has directed attention toward ethnicity as a calculation of social, economic, and political profits carried out by political elites. Joane Nagel, for example, has argued that the occurrence of ethnic minority mobilization is the result of individuals engaging ‘in continuous assessment of situation and audience, emphasizing or deemphasizing particular dimensions of ethnicity according to some measure of utility or feasibility’ (Nagel 1996: 23). Some theorists have contended that ethnic identity directly evolves out of elite competition (Brass 1991).

One of the important points of reference in this literature is the work by social anthropologist Fredrik Barth. Although the element of political competition was only implicit in his most influential work—written in 1969—on ethnic groups and boundaries, by 1994 Barth was contending that political factors deserve more attention. He suggested that the creation of ethnicity should not be seen as taking place only on the interpersonal level but that it is also dependent on collective action (Barth calls this the ‘median level’). The importance of Barth’s view for students of political relations was primarily that it cleared a way for studying the role of elites and their strategic action in the construction of ethnic boundaries. In other words, the interactional element introduced by Barth’s 1969 article was taken a step further and brought into the scope of theories of political competition. The competition model is discernable in the writings of a number of political scientists, including Paul Brass (1991), Abner Cohen (1996), and Michael Hechter (1996). In different ways they have all adopted a more or less explicit instrumentalist view of ethnic identity formation, offering a great deal of attention to the role of elites who engage in struggle for political power, maximization of preferences, and rational choice. A number of these authors have also devoted attention to the circumstances that constrain the making of strategic decisions. Also Barth himself had become increasingly aware of this; in 1994 he argued that the state should be taken into consideration as an important factor determining mobilization patterns (Barth 1994: 19). Consequently, several other researchers have begun to draw attention specifically to the fact that ethnic identities appear to be dependent on ethnic classifications promoted by political elites and the state.

2.4 Political Process approaches to ethnic mobilization: Opportunity Structures and Framing

The ‘political process’ perspective seeks to fuse attention to competition with attention to a socially structured context. Like the competition perspective, the political process perspective regards a number of organizational aspects as key: the activities of those who present themselves as leaders of ethnic minorities, their resources, their ability to make public claims in the name of the minority, and their attempts to garner mass support. But the political process perspective directs attention to two additional
elements: ‘political opportunity structure’ and ‘framing.’ The inspiration has been drawn from the literature on social movements, which argues that collective action is more than just the result of strategic and instrumental rationality (Cohen and Arato 1995: 510). It is important to recognize, this literature argues, that social movements evolve around the articulation of identity and the awareness of the influence of power relations on the creation of identity.

Divisions in society are not simply reflected in politics, neither are they merely the result of strategic action. Divisions are constructed through politics within the context of dominant perceptions in society. In contrast to the culturalist and the competition perspectives, the political process perspective on ethnic mobilization argues that there is a two-way relationship between political action and interests. Interests are not just ‘out there,’ waiting for ethnic leaders to organize around, but are shaped by the institutional environment and the dominant discursive context.

While the competition perspective focuses on resource competition as the most important factor influencing patterns of ethnic mobilization, the political process perspective attaches crucial importance to the institutional environment (the political opportunity structure) and the symbolic and discursive dimensions of mobilization (framing processes)

—both fields of influence that have been taken into account in the comparative analysis of social movements (McAdam et al. 1996). This approach sets ethnic identity against the broader picture of social movements utilizing identity as a basis for mobilization in search of access to political power, material resources, and the control of representation. Let me, in turn, discuss the concepts of ‘political opportunity structure’ and ‘framing’.

The ‘political opportunity structure’ (often abbreviated as POS) is the complex compound of formal and informal political conditions into which a movement, including an ethnic one, must enter when it becomes active (McAdam et al. 1996; Tarrow 1994). It includes what can be regarded as the stable properties of the institutional environment, such as the state’s propensity to repression or the openness of the institutionalized system (in the case of ethnic movements, the official recognition of ethnic groups or the existence of special channels for ethnic representation). It also includes less stable factors such as the presence or absence of elite allies, or the shifts in political alliances (in the case of ethnic movements, for example, the political position of other identity groups).

According to a brief definition offered by Sidney Tarrow, the POS comprises ‘consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure’ (Tarrow 1994: 18). A frequently used way of conceptualizing the POS is offered by Hanspeter Kriesi and Marco Guigni (1995: xiii–xvi). These authors have argued that the POS is made up of four components:

- national cleavage structures (the established political conflicts in a country, which arguably impose important constraints on newly emerging movements);
- formal institutional structures (institutional make-up of the stable elements of the political system, such as parliament, public administration, or other more direct democratic procedures);
- prevailing informal strategies in dealing with social movements (strategies members of the political system typically employ to deal with social movements);
- alliance structure (cyclical elements of change in the political system such as the availability of influential allies or the shifts in ruling alignments).
POS perspectives have mainly been developed in the context of the study of social movements. In the structural-functionalist approaches from the 1950s and 1960s (think of the work of Neil Smelser or Arthur William Kornhauser) any social action was regarded as an uncalculated and irrational by-product of a large-scale social transformation (della Porta and Diani 1999: 7). Resource mobilization criticized this perspective (Oberschall 1973; Zald and Ash 1966), as it did other collective behaviour perspectives that conceived social movements as collective responses to a changing environment. The resource mobilization approach construed collective movements as forms of political behaviour driven by actors who calculate the costs and benefits of their collective action in relation to the limited material or nonmaterial resources available. Social movements were thus no longer seen as simply reactive or grievance-based collective phenomena, but as conscious efforts by professionally organized actors, making rational choices within the political system (della Porta and Diani 1999: 9). Resource mobilization approaches in turn were criticized for ignoring the structural context of contentious politics. The political and institutional environment, and particularly the relation between institutional political actors and social protest, was the main concern of those who became known as the ‘political process’ theorists (della Porta and Diani 1999: 9). Key to their line of argumentation was that particular characteristics of the external environment, especially the openness or closure of the political system, were relevant to the development of social movements (Eisinger 1973). For authors such as Doug McAdam (1982) and Sidney Tarrow (1983), POS referred to both the general receptivity of a given political system to the collective contention by social challengers and the formal access points they have to the institutions of the political system (McAdam 1996). In the ‘new social movements’ tradition researchers applied the POS concept mostly in comparative research designs, trying to account for the crossnational differences in the appearance and organizational form of comparable movements on the basis of the properties of the national political systems in which they are embedded (McAdam et al. 1996: 3).

The POS perspective provides an important point of support for studying the formation of ethnic mobilization. Scholars writing about ethnic minority mobilization within this perspective have been attentive to the properties of the political context that facilitate or constrain the formation of a certain movement identity. Moreover, the theory is compelling because it responds to an intuitive feeling that social movements will act in accord with the institutional opportunities and constraints with which they are confronted in a given political system. Such an idea is also related to what James March and Johan Olsen have labeled ‘the logic of appropriateness’ (March and Olsen 1989). This is the logic according to which the strategies and preferences of actors are determined and created by institutions. ‘Institutions create or socially construct the actors’ identities, belongings, definitions of reality and shared meanings’ (Rothstein 2000: 147).

Interestingly, the POS perspective has served as a primary source of inspiration for an emerging research tradition among scholars who have attempted to understand the political mobilization of immigrant minorities in established Western European democracies (Martiniello and Statham 1999). The argument held in common by these researchers is that the shape of the institutional political context is a key variable influencing and fostering the ethnic mobilization of minorities.

However, we should be aware that the current studies that have applied POS theory as a point of departure for empirical research have not remained entirely without problems. Hassan Bousetta has shown that formal and informal organizational processes that take place inside an ethnic movement and give rise to certain strategic choices (a field which he calls ‘infra-politics’) are often left out of sight when exclusive use of the POS perspective is employed (Bousetta 2001: 19–20). In other words, the
internal organizational processes should be considered an integral part of the political mobilization of ethnic minorities, but remain hidden when importance is attached only to the ‘institutionalized’ processes. Struggles surrounding strategic choices or questions of representation and group boundaries may take place between actors within the organizational realm of an ethnic movement. These may have a certain impact on how a movement will develop and will need to be conceptualized as an area of research.

Furthermore, POS studies have also been criticized for overemphasizing the institutional political context as a causal variable and de-emphasizing other factors that may have contributed to the formation of opportunities. It must be realized that opportunities and constraints are not simply given. They have to be perceived as opportunities first before they will be able to function as such (Jenson 1998).

Many authors on social movements agree these problems can to some extent be avoided when the POS perspective is integrated with insights that have been developed in the ‘framing’ literature (McAdam et al. 1996). In various types of research the term ‘frame’ has been used to denote, in its most general sense, a schema of interpretation. The verb ‘to frame’ refers then to a process through which meaning is reproduced in society. Most studies in social science that use the concept of framing offer a definition derived from the writings of Erving Goffman, in particular his book Frame Analysis (Goffman 1975). Goffman used the designation ‘primary framework’ to refer to what he called a ‘conceptual structure’ that organizes interpretation. The concept became an important source of inspiration for scholars interested in the development of social movements (McAdam et al. 1996). These scholars shifted the focus away from frames as pure cognition and started to concentrate on the power of deliberate framing within the organizational and collective processes that are part of mobilization (Johnston 1995: 217). For them, frames not only perform an interpretative function, as suggested by Goffman. They are also ‘made’ by movement leaders with the specific intention ‘to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists’ (Snow and Benford 1998: 198).

Social movement scholars in general have been interested in framing when understood as the way in which movement actors disseminate their understanding of social reality in order to appeal to a constituency. Different authors have often highlighted different aspects of the framing process, some emphasizing the individual control over framing processes. On this view, research has to focus on the ability of activists to actively assign meaning to social reality, promote a certain understanding of reality, and intentionally choose a frame for mobilization. They define framing as ‘the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion a shared understanding of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action’ (McAdam et al. 1996: 6). Others, however, have emphasized that the process of framing does not take place in a vacuum (Benford and Snow 2000: 628). For them, research should not discard the fact that framing is always negotiated and is to a certain degree shaped by the complex, multi-organizational, multi-institutional arenas in which it takes place. These authors have stressed that frame diffusion (how frames spread) and frame resonance (how frames become effective) is affected by the cultural and political environment. In this way, Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow have defined framing as the generation and diffusion by movement actors of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings, a process which is facilitated or constrained by the cultural and political context, including the framing/counterframings of the elites in power (Benford and Snow 2000). Defined as such, the concept of ‘framing’ creates an opportunity to examine both the element of choice in the construction of ethnic identity (the use of intentional frames) and the element of designation (the presence of countermobilizing frames or the (in)ability of a frame to resonate in a given context).
The concept of framing has offered a useful contribution to the study of ethnic mobilization. With regard to movement identity, it can be said that such an identity is created through framing. Constituencies do not exist until they are defined through an identity frame (Jenson 1998: 5). Identity frames are central to the process of ethnic minority mobilization, but it is likely that also other related frames will be employed during this process. Indeed, it is the contention of social movement scholars like Benford and Snow that different types of framing processes help to shape a social movement and its outcome. In their view, any movement has a number of core framing tasks: ‘diagnostic framing’ (problem identification and attribution), ‘prognostic framing’ (perspectives on how to remedy a certain problem), and ‘motivational framing’ (providing a rationale for action) (Benford and Snow 2000).

3. Different outcomes: what explains the radicalization of ethnic claims?

Why do some forms of ethnic mobilization lead to radicalization and conflict, while others remain moderate and stay within the confines of the existing states system? Different theories have been formulated meant to explain the widely different outcomes of ethnic mobilization. One theoretical approach argues that the democratic state has an overwhelming responsibility in the creation of ethnic conflict. Michael Mann, for example, argues that murderous ‘ethnic cleansing is a hazard of the age of democracy since amid multiethnicity the ideal of rule by the people began to entwine the demos with the dominant ethnopol, generating organic conceptions of the nation and the state that encourage the cleansing of minorities’ (Mann 2005). His theory is based on a historical survey of democratizing states throughout the 20th century. The work of Paul Collier (2009) seems to offer contemporary evidence for that same idea. On the basis of an analysis of contemporary civil wars Collier argues that that the spread of elections and peace settlements in the world’s most dangerous countries may not lead to lasting peace but rather to more conflict, if the wrong features of democracy are promoted. More in particular, democracy introduces the concepts of ‘minority’ and ‘majority’, and without the proper checks and balances and methods of representation such division may soon instill resentment among majorities as well as minorities. When these majorities and minorities are defined on the basis of ethnic characteristics, an ethnic war may easily ensue. In his research on ethnic rioting in India, Ashutosh Varshney (2003) finds that democratic attitudes – more in particular, engagement in civic life – are an effective prevention mechanism against ethnic conflict. Thus, while democracy as an institutional system may create ethnic violence, fostering democratic attitudes may be an adequate way to avoid such violence. In his work Varshney shows that networks of civic engagement (in the form of integrated business organizations, trade unions, political parties, and professional associations) that function across community boundaries—in his case they bring Hindu and Muslim urban communities together - are a key factor in controlling outbreaks of ethnic conflict.

While the sudden introduction of a democratic system in countries where there is no tradition of democratic values might be one element stimulating ethnic conflict, the expanding literature on the topic brings a broad range of other factors into view. Most authors currently start from the assumption that there is no single factor responsible for tipping the balance towards violence. They look for interactions between various sets of factors such as the institutional context, the political climate and the specific traits and interests of the political players involved. Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff, for example, have developed an analytical framework that attaches key importance to the interplay between three sets of factor, which they call ‘motives’, ‘means’ and ‘opportunities’ (Cordell and Wolff 2010: 44). If these three sets of factors, of which two are actor-related (means and motives) and one is rather more a matter of context, are present then the chances for ethnic conflict rise.
Theoretical writing about ethnic conflict can indeed fruitfully be analyzed with the help of this framework. Yet through such an analysis it will become clear that some researchers tend to emphasize actor-related factors while others tend to stick to their belief in the key impact of environment-related factors. Of those who continue to emphasize context, for example, there are some who have argued that ethnic claims are more likely to radicalize when a power vacuum exists or when an ethnically defined population fears that it will be exploited. Others have put more responsibility in the hands of elites. Elite competition theories, for example, look at the motives of powerholders and ethnic leaders who build on existing ethnic loyalties to mobilize political support for violence. These theories argue that variation is caused by shifting motives among the mobilizing elites. Rational choice approaches build on such analysis. Erin Jenne (2007), for example, who researched the matter in the European context (she investigated and compared different episodes of ethnic mobilization across a range of cases in central and southeastern Europe), argues that we need a theory that explains variation in ethnic mobilization outcomes by considering these outcomes as results of bargaining processes between actors. Her ‘ethnic bargaining model’ attaches crucial importance to the bargaining between putative minority representatives, state institutions, and external lobbies (that is, any other state, organization, or private interest that lobbies directly on behalf of the minority). By examining how these actors are linked to each other in a bargaining game, one should be able to predict more precisely when and why ethnic minority mobilizers will radicalize their claims.

One may conclude that while there is growing consensus about the hypothesis that not one but various interacting factors are responsible for turning ethnic mobilization into violent ethnic conflict, there is no consensus yet on which elements to include in a definite list of factors. More empirical research will no doubt be needed before social scientists will come to such a list. On the other hand, a critical note with regard to the attempt of making such a list might be in order. When attempting to analyze the emergence of ethnic conflict it is important to keep in mind that ‘ethnic conflict’ is a diverse phenomenon. As Rogers Brubaker and David Laitin have argued already in 1998: instances of ethnic violence are ‘composite and causally heterogeneous, consisting not of an assemblage of causally identical unit instances of ethnic violence but of a number of different types of actions, processes, occurrences, and events’ (Brubaker and Laitin 1998: 446). Therefore, so Brubaker and Laitin argue, we need to see the existing variety within what we all to often casually call ‘ethnic conflict’. Such a plea for disaggregation has lost nothing of its validity in current times. Before we engage in a further debate about the factors that might explain ethnic conflict, it is important that we gain a better and more nuanced understanding of what it is exactly that we seek to explain.
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